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COORDINATION QUESTIONS

Register of Development Activities of the United Nations System

Report of the Administrative Committee on Coordination

SUMMARY

In 1989 the Administrative Committee on Coordination informed the Committee for Programme and Coordination and the Economic and Social Council that it planned to conduct a large-scale survey of end-users of the second edition of the Register of Development Activities in order to gauge the degree of the Register's utility and to highlight areas where improvements could be made.

This report contains a summary of the results of that survey, which was conducted by the secretariat of the Advisory Committee for the Coordination of Information Systems (ACCIS) in 1990-1991. ACC proposes to continue publication of the Register in its present form but will request ACCIS to examine to what extent additional needs of users could be met while retaining its basic format.

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1. The preparation of a register of development activities of the United Nations system was requested in 1982 by Economic and Social Council resolution 1982/71 and General Assembly resolution 37/226.

2. By its decision 1983/9, the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) established an Advisory Committee for the Coordination of Information Systems (ACCIS) and approved its work programme, which included the preparation of the requested register of development activities. At its twenty-third session, the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) welcomed the approach adopted by ACC in establishing new arrangements for the coordination of information systems and noted with satisfaction the proposal for the development of the register (E/1983/48, annex, subprogramme 3). ACCIS held its first session in September 1983 and appointed a technical panel under the leadership of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), with the United Nations Secretariat, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank as members, to undertake a feasibility study of the register.

3. The panel met in January 1984, devised a plan of work and undertook extensive consultations with all the organizations of the United Nations system. It met again in May 1984 and, following further consultations, drew up a detailed proposal, which was considered by ACCIS in September 1984 and then submitted to ACC at its second regular session of that year. At the request of ACC, ACCIS held a special session in January 1985 to examine the design of the register, its scope, problems of implementation, institutional arrangements and financial implications. Subsequently, ACC submitted to CPC, at its twenty-fifth session, a report on the questions examined by ACCIS (E/AC.51/1985/7), which included an implementation plan.

4. Owing to lack of time, CPC decided not to discuss the ACC report but to transmit it directly to the Economic and Social Council at its second regular session of 1985. At that session, the Council, in section VII of resolution 1985/76, took note of the ACC register proposal and urged its early implementation; it also invited ACC to proceed with the technical design for the establishment and operation of the register and to submit a detailed progress report to CPC at its twenty-sixth session, including information on cost, funding, assessment of utility to Member States and agency participation. With regard to funding, the Council decided that the cost to be borne by the United Nations should be limited to the resources appropriated in the regular budget under paragraph 23 of General Assembly resolution 37/226.

5. During 1986, ACCIS developed mainframe and microcomputer prototypes of the register; established the register database containing data from test agencies; used the microcomputer version to demonstrate the register to potential users; and submitted the requested detailed progress report (E/AC.51/1986/12) to CPC at its twenty-sixth session. At that session, CPC requested a further fully detailed progress report and recommended that ACC ensure that the coverage of development activities in the register be comprehensive and that there be full participation in the register by organizations of the United Nations system.

6. In 1987, ACCIS analysed technical issues associated with the test prototypes; interviewed representatives of 19 organizations on the availability of data and the associated costs; queried States Members of the United Nations by questionnaire on the usefulness of the register; analysed responses from Member States and input from organizations of the United Nations system; and developed a revised proposal for creation of the register in the light of the responses received from Member States and organizations.

7. As a result of these consultations, the original ACC proposal, submitted in 1985, was substantially revised and presented to CPC at its twenty-seventh session in a progress report (E/AC.51/1987/13). Since the majority of Member States replying to the questionnaire had shown little interest in on-line access and preferred a printed register, this made it possible to abandon the idea of maintaining an on-line information service and to absorb the cost of the register within the ACCIS budget instead of seeking the additional resources which an on-line information service would have required. After CPC transmitted the progress report containing the revised proposal (E/AC.51/1987/13) to the Economic and Social Council, the latter took note of the report (Council decision 1987/183) and the practical arrangements for compiling the register commenced.

8. The first Register containing 1987 data for all United Nations system organizations involved in social and economic development activities was published in 1988. Since then, two additional registers, respectively containing 1988 and 1989 data, have been published at annual intervals.

9. Two thousand copies of each Register are printed. Several hundred are sold to the general public. Complimentary copies are mailed to Member States and their missions, both in Geneva and New York; to the executive head of each organization of the United Nations system; and to the organizations' subsidiary units and departments involved in development work. The Register has been well received, as proven by the growing demand for it especially in the United Nations system. Arrangements have been made with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to deliver a copy of the Register to each one of its resident representatives. Similar arrangements are now being negotiated for field offices of the United Nations and the specialized agencies.

10. In 1989, the ACC in its decision 1989/16 took note with satisfaction of the publication of the first issue of the Register and subsequently informed the Economic and Social Council that it planned to conduct a large-scale, searching survey of end-users with the publication of the second edition in order to gauge the degree of the Register's utility and to highlight areas where improvements could be made (see E/1989/74). The present report summarizes the results of that survey, which was carried out by two independent outside experts.

11. The major issues addressed in the survey were (a) usefulness to end-users and (b) complementarity with other United Nations system reports. Responses focusing on the first issue were principally elicited from Member States and other users by means of a questionnaire distributed with the 1988 Register.

Additional input came from face-to-face interviews with Government officials from a sample of Member States. These included a cross-section of developed and developing countries. In all cases except one, which saw minimal use of the Register in multilateral aid planning, the reaction was positive and corroborated the final results of the survey questionnaire. In particular, the appeal of the Register appears to reside in its comprehensiveness and ease of use. Though the amount of information given by the Register was generally considered satisfactory, a desire for more information per activity indicated a potential area for improvement.

12. Regarding the second issue, complementarity, the Register was compared with other development reports produced by the United Nations system, in particular by UNDP, the Office of the Director-General for Development and International Economic Cooperation of the United Nations Secretariat and ACC. The results indicate that though some of its information overlaps with other reports, the Register proves to be unique in bringing together a complete, project-by-project record of United Nations development activities, as well as comparative summary information.

13. In summary, the results obtained from the survey are as follows:

(a) The Register is greatly appreciated as the sole comprehensive resource for information on all development activities of the United Nations system;

(b) The paucity of differences between donor and recipient countries and between Member States and international organizations underscores the common utility of the Register to these diverse constituencies;

(c) A comparison of the judged value of the Register over a range of specific purposes shows that it is regarded as having highest utility for precisely those objectives it is intended to serve: policy and planning at national levels, as well as at programme and project levels;

(d) It is also viewed as being especially helpful to international non-governmental organizations for research and coordination;

(e) The limitations of the Register have chiefly to do with the number of data elements covered and their currency. A majority of respondents would like its scope increased, at least to include brief project or activity descriptions in addition to titles. While year-old data are still regarded as useful, more timely information would be of greater value;

(f) Having the Register available as a printed product is preferred by the majority of users, not because of negative views of on-line databases, but rather because the users are not yet well positioned technologically to take advantage of them;

(g) The coverage of the Register is unique and at present there is no other known source that duplicates its contents;

(h) In the future, it may be feasible to combine the Register and the UNDP development cooperation reports. However, at this point the ACCIS Register is the only database that can provide a project-by-project record of United Nations development activities, as well as consistent summary information.

14. In the light of these survey results, ACC proposes to continue publication of the Register in its present form but will request ACCIS to examine to what extent additional needs of users can be met while retaining the basic format.